PIAGNONE EXEMPLARITY AND THE FLORENTINE LITERARY CANON IN THE VITA DI GIROLAMO BENIVIENI

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At a sumptuous banquet hosted by Cardinal Giulio de’ Medici, Girolamo Benivieni (1453-1542)—poet, scholar, and translator—found himself enjoying the witty dinner repartee of the cardinal’s engaging and powerful guests.¹ Benivieni, however, differed from his fellow diners in at least one important respect: he openly and unashamedly professed his association with the Dominican preacher Girolamo Savonarola. In 1494 Savonarola’s supporters had ousted the perceived tyrant Piero de’ Medici to set up an unusual republic in Florence.² Benivieni had translated various writings by Savonarola and had written some songs for Florentine civic processions and new rituals, such as the “Burning of the Vanities” in 1496 and ’97. Piagnoni, once an insult given to Savonarola’s religious reformists for their copious penitential weeping, became a collective name that adherents, like Girolamo, proudly embraced.

At the table, the conversation began to focus on the civic reforms of the friar’s followers, which continued even long after Savonarola was executed.³ The other dinner guests so criticized Savonarola that they expected

¹I warmly acknowledge and thank Lorenzo Polizzotto for his generous assistance in suggesting better renditions of various passages of the Vita di Benivieni, as well as for his expertise in confirming the information presented in note 3. I would also like to thank William Kennedy, Claudia Lazzaro, John Najemy, Carol Kaske, Julia Cozzarelli, and all of the participants of Cornell University’s Early Modern colloquium in March 2004 who gave me such constructive feedback on an earlier version of this paper. My thanks, too, go to Penn State colleague Maria Truglio who helped me to acquire a microform copy of Antonio Benivieni’s Vita di Girolamo Benivieni from the Archivio di Stato in Florence.

²During this Republic between 1494 and 1498, Florentines claimed Christ as their king and the Virgin Mary as their queen, but looked to Savonarola for temporal guidance. See the descriptions of piagnoni governance by Girolamo Benivieni in Commento di Hieronymo Benivieni sopra a più sue canzone et sonetti dello Amore et della Belleza Divina, ff. 111r-112v and 115r-116v, and by Luca Landucci in his Diario fiorentino, as well as the critical studies by Donald Weinstein and Polizzotto.

³Antonio Benivieni does not provide a date for the banquet. I suspect that the
to force Benivieni to blush with shame. Finally, Cardinal Giulio de’ Medici, future Pope Clement VII, felt obliged to ask, “Girolamo, voi fate professione di credere al Frate, come può stare l’essere insiememente amico et affezzionato nostro?” (Girolamo, you profess to believe in the Friar, [so] how can you also be our friend and intimate? 40v-41r).

Benivieni, who is said to have never lacked for a ready response, happily replied in the “manner of Gamaliel to the Scribes”:

Monsignore mio, se l’opera del Frate è humana, la si risolverà presto per se stessa; se l’è di Dio, che ché gli uomini se ne facciano, l’andrà per certo innanzi. Ma Vossignoria Illustissima non tema già mai dell’ami e devoti del Frate, essi aspettando il miracolo, e che Dio operi, quieti se ne stanno. Guardisi bene ella da alcuni di questi mormoratori inquieti che l’ha d’attorno, i quali, sempre insatiabili, non restano o resteranno già mai di travagliare, e nuovi e vasti concetti concependo altrui sollevare per compimento e sfogo dei loro smoderati appetiti. (41r-41v)

[Monsignor mine, if the Friar’s work is human, it will resolve itself quickly on its own; but if it is of God, then no matter what men might do, it will move ahead. But your Excellency need not ever fear the Friar’s friends and disciples, who quietly await the miracle that God might work. Rather guard yourself well against these dissatisfied whisperers around you who, insatiable, never cease to trouble others with their impious machinations and to vent their excessive appetites.]

With this remark Benivieni silenced the bitter and harsh provocateurs because it was apparent to all that he had “la conscientia più netta di loro, l’ingegno elevato e la lingua pronta” (41v, “a clearer conscience than they had, as well as lofty genius and quick wit”). The wise cardinal understood only too well Benivieni’s words and sagaciously changed the subject of conversation. The author concludes the episode by stating, “Girolamo si fu las-

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4 English translations of the Vita throughout are mine. In my citations of the Italian text, I have taken the liberty to modernize Benivieni’s punctuation and expand his many abbreviations. In this manuscript, “può stare” is written above “accozzate voi,” which was stricken by the author.

5 The reference concerning Gamaliel and the Scribes (“il buon vecchio allegramente e tosto rispose, secondo l’antico motto di Gamaliel alli Scribi”) is to Acts 5:34-39, which describes an episode of the envy of authorities toward the popularity of Jesus’ apostles. The author thus implies that Girolamo was creating a parallel between Savonarola and Jesus.
ciato stare nella sua opinione e natia libertà” (41v, “Girolamo was allowed to keep his own opinion and innate liberty”).

The recounting of this episode is one of the more spirited descriptions in the Vita di Girolamo Benivieni by Antonio Benivieni the Younger (1533-98). A careful reading of this and other excerpts from the Vita can yield much more, however, than a chuckle at Medici flatterers or memories of the deceased Girolamo Benivieni’s good example. The Vita offers a perspective—approximately seventy years after the event described—on one of the primary representatives of piagnone ideology, and the subtle complexity of his relationship to both Medicean partisans (known as palleschi or bigi), as well as on other episodes to proponents of the secular Florentine republic (often called arrabbiati).6

The purpose of this study is to enrich our understanding of the political and cultural relationships during the last decades of the Quattrocento and first decades of the Cinquecento by considering the Vita’s import not as biography, but as a document to consider alongside other statements concerning the estimation of literary works and perspectives of the questione della lingua at the time. I argue that we have inherited primarily Medicean and secular republican views on these issues from Cristoforo Landino to Niccolò Machiavelli, from Agnolo Poliziano to Giambattista Gelli, and from Lorenzo de’ Medici himself to Francesco Guicciardini. Moreover, these views differ sometimes subtly, sometimes strikingly, from the piagnone position. While my focus is on Girolamo Benivieni, further study of his works and reputation may also help us to come to a better understanding of the intellectual and spiritual motivations of other cultural figures who embraced the piagnone ethos. Giovanni Pico della

6Antonio’s retrospective (c. 1580) represents, of course, a late view superimposed on Girolamo’s interpretive contributions during the earlier decades of the Cinquecento. There may be cultural and ideological reasons for writing a work like the Vita during the height of the Catholic Reformation—reasons certainly worth pursuing in future studies. On the date of the work’s composition, according to Antonio’s biographer, Caterina Re, it is not possible to date the Vita with any more precision: “Quanto alla Vita di G. Benivieni, non abbiamo nessun argomento sicuro per determinare l’età in cui fu scritta. Certo non avanti gli ultimi dell’ottavo decennio del secolo o i primi del nono, almeno nelle redazioni da noi conosciute (poichè doveva trovarsi già presso il Benivieni il copista Gonelli, e questi, vedemmo, si faceva prete nel 1589, e riveduta dopo il 1590” 36). According to biographical studies of both Benivieni by Caterina Re, the Benivieni share largely the same ideological perspective on literature and the questione della lingua.
Mirandola and Sandro Botticelli, among others, followed paths similar to Girolamo Benivieni's, flourishing in the artistically and culturally fertile milieu of the Laurentian circle before converting to the radical spiritual life expounded from the pulpit of San Marco.7

Antonio Benivieni's Vita di Girolamo Benivieni

Antonio Benivieni the Younger wrote the biography of his great-uncle Girolamo Benivieni, consisting of 72 folios in the Carte Gianni version in the Archivio di Stato in Florence. The unusually long and prominent life of octogenarian Girolamo Benivieni surely deserved biographical treatment. When he published his edition of Dante's Divine Comedy in 1506, Girolamo could claim the distinction, according to Carlo Dionisotti, of being the "maggior poeta in volgare, che a Firenze fosse rimasto" (377, “the greatest vernacular poet still living in Florence”). In addition to the afore-mentioned piagnone songs and translations of Savonarola's works, Benivieni also wrote well received pastoral poetry and recast a Boccaccian novella in verse. Moreover, he surpassed nearly all of his esteemed contemporaries in the study of the Hebrew language.8 He is buried in the same tomb in San Marco with his dearest friend Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-94).

Unfortunately, Antonio's Vita di Girolamo Benivieni has very limited value as a biography. In his sometimes exalted language, the adulatory nephew seems almost to have confused Girolamo's life with a vita di un santo. One scholar, Luigi Greco, recognized the importance to Dante studies of one section of the Vita, republishing in 1897 a brief excerpt as “La difesa di Dante di G. Benivieni.” What has yet to be examined, however, is a relatively substantial section of the Vita that suggests a kind of piagnone literary canon and implicitly maps how some writers' political positions influence their valuation as literary contributors.

Antonio asserts that he writes the Vita to present "alla moderna gioventù l'esempio assai fresco di uno prudente cittadino, solenne litterato, ottimo cristiano, e lodevole poeta" (1r, “to today's youth the very recent

7On Pico, see the biographical studies by Roulier and Jacobelli; for more specific considerations of Botticelli's relationship to the piagnone movement, see the studies by Meltzoff and Hatfield. This version differs in certain passages from the copy in BNFII.1.91, pp. 231-278.

8Benivieni had earned such high regard for his knowledge of Hebrew that he was asked late in life to make an Italian vernacular translation of the Bible, a task that he never accomplished. See Olga Zorzi Pugliese's study.
example of a prudent citizen, solemn scholar, good Christian, and praiseworthy poet”). Before the reader can learn much else about the actual life of Girolamo Benivieni, however, Antonio unexpectedly launches into an extended consideration of the questione della lingua (starting at fol. 2v). He presents Benivieni as understanding long before his peers the dignity of the Florentine vernacular and the potential pitfalls of writing in a language other than the one spoken in everyday exchanges. In fact, the digression—if indeed Antonio’s examination of language, literary models, and the differences in literary assessment between Florence and other cities, such as Venice, can be called a digression—continues until fol. 15v, when he is suddenly reminded that his task is to write a biography, at which point he offers a rather sheepish apology:

E qui si farà per avventura meraviglia qualcuno, atteso lo stile di coloro che scrivono le vite altrui, soliti a referire di quel tale, molto sovente ei fece, e disse, egli andò in quel luogo, ei fu mandato nel cotale, il contrario leggendo al presente di Girolamo. Ei non fece la tal cosa, ei si astenne da quella, ei non si spiccò guari da Firenze, e sia chi di noi anco si faccia beffe, il quale habbía tolto a scrivere di piana e quieta persona. (f. 15v)

[And here perhaps someone will wonder who is accustomed to the style of those who write the lives of others, referring very often to him saying that he did this, he said that, he went here, and was sent there, because presently one reads just the opposite concerning Girolamo. He did not do this, and abstained from that, and he hardly ventured outside Florence. And there may be some who also make fun of us, who have undertaken to write about a simple and quiet person.]

The personal quality that Antonio particularly praises in Benivieni and upholds for emulation by young people of his day is, above all, to “know thyself” (repeated various times throughout the work, including on 2v and 49v). Girolamo is also praised as “affable” (12v), and not afraid to correct others for their trespasses against virtue, such as when he exhorts women not to dress ostentatiously (14r). He shuns the trappings of the sumptuous life (dances, balls, masquerades, etc., 23v-24r). Antonio extols at length the simple life his great-uncle led, including the virtues of simple food, which, he states, is less upsetting to the stomach (16v-17r). In short, according to Antonio’s typical exaggeration, Girolamo was “l’exemplio della vita modesta, [che] con e’ raggionamenti accorri et saggi, fu al Mondo utile et buono come viene ragionato del sappientissimo Socrate in Atene” (17v, “the paragon of the modest life, who with his proper and wise thoughts was to the world as useful and good as it is said of the very wise Socrates in
By the time Antonio reaches folio 57r, he has so perfected the image of Girolamo as the morally austere, wise old man, who would frequently remark on how grand things were in the days of old, having outlived his age, that even Antonio came to remark: “veduto habbiamo era il canuto e già decrepito Benivieni qualità molto lodevoli e rare” (“we have seen that the white-haired and at this point decrepit Benivieni [had] very praiseworthy and rare qualities”).

Savonarola, Luca Landucci, and Girolamo Benivieni himself, among others, praise the qualities of the *piagnone* ideal of virtue and comportment—religious piety, humility, courage to correct others out of Christian charity, simplicity, wisdom, etc. These same ideals are directly attributed to Girolamo in Antonio’s *Vita*. The vision of personal liberty—that *innata libertà* that Girolamo was able to preserve in his conversation at the cardinal’s dinner table, the freedom to keep his religious beliefs and even to upbraid the other dinner guests for their perceived shortcomings—echoes the freedom of the *piagnoni*, and particularly Savonarola’s *fanciulli*, during the height of their influence in the 1490s to rebuke the vices of others:

The *fanciulli* tore a veil off of a young woman’s head in Via Martelli, which caused a great disturbance among her relatives. This happened because Fra Girolamo had urged the *fanciulli* to correct people who were wearing inappropriate clothing, and to reprove gamblers. When someone said, ‘Here come the Friar’s *fanciulli,*’ every gambler fled, no matter how bold he might have been, and women went about dressed modestly.\(^9\)

The *piagnone* vision of “innate liberty” is shown to have differed substantially from, for example, that of the *bigi* ladies, strolling around the city wearing their finest fashions, or that of the *arrabbiati* gentlemen playing cards on the main square.\(^11\) In fact, the three political factions insistently

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9 Antonio’s words frequently contain rich nuances of meaning, as they do here in his comparison of Girolamo to Socrates. Lorenzo de’ Medici’s circle of artists, scholars, and statesmen promoted Florence as the New Athens and hailed the *rinascimento* of classical culture on the Arno. Antonio certainly emphasizes Girolamo’s wisdom and goodness, but he may also be implicitly suggesting the wisdom and appropriateness for authors to act with ideological subtlety in order to survive in the complex Florentine political situation.

10 From Landucci’s *Diario fiorentino*, 7 February 1496, my translation.

11 Girolamo Benivieni emphasizes the difference between this liberty (of speech and religion) and what he sees as the mere license to display one’s immodest dress or gamble on the streets (which, for Benivieni, are acts that do not repre-
claimed different great cities as their model for Florence. Piagnoni saw in Florence the rise of a New Jerusalem, while arrabbiati sought a New (Republican) Rome and Medici supporters called Florence the “Novella Atene” (New Athens). Just as the piagnoni possessed a civic political vision that differed from both Medicean and secular republican platforms, so too, the Vita implies, do they possess differing literary assessments.

At the heart of his biography, Antonio presents a genealogy of great Florentine authors. He leaves aside the Three Crowns of Florentine Literature—referring to Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch—because their words alone, he says, are sufficient to ensure their lasting fame (27v, “lassiamoci stare le fama dei tre Autori più nobili e principali, di loro medesimi ella parola a bastanza”). He continues:

... ma etiamdio furono innanzi a questi Ser Brunetto Latini, e Guido Cavalcanti, e alcuni altri basti ci mostrare come sempre si hereditaron le Muse a Firenze, che seguito a Dante, Fazio del Uberti, al Petrarcha, il suo buon discepolo fra Luigi Marsili, il quale in divinità senti molto e molto, hebbeci Coluccio Salutati, rectorico e oratore, Dino Frescobaldi Poeta, le rime de’ quali ancora in tanta chiarezza e copia moderna sono pure in qualche considerazione e pregio, hebbeci messer Francesco da Barberino, Luca da Panzano e altri Scrittori, Matteo Palmieri, Gianozzo Manetti, il Marsupino, e il Landino, e produsse alla fine questo Paese quel aria di scienzie, quel vaso di santità così vigilante e provido Pastore dell’Arcivescovo (Santo) Antonino, ma di questi così fatti non fa mestiero a noi particolarmente referire al presente, e ci basti haver conchiuso come ha successivamente Fiorenza generati servidi ingegni (28r-v).

[But before these (three) there were also Ser Brunetto Latini and Guido Cavalcanti and some others who suffice to show us how the muses always were inherited in Florence, for Fazio degli Uberti followed Dante, Petrarch was followed by his good disciple Fra Luigi Marsili, who in the-

sent personal liberty, but rather, personal licentiousness). In his book, Polizzotto (250) presents another report of Benivieni’s response to Cardinal Giulio de’ Medici during the same dinner described in this study’s opening pages. It is from Jacopo Piti’s Dell’Istoria fiorentina, 123, and also emphasizes the notion of liberty (in this case libertà comune): “Io non niego, monsignore illustrissimo, di non essere de’ seguaci del Frate, ed insieme con tutti gli uomini dabbene di questa città, desiderare la libertà comune, ma ne io, né coloro faranno per tal conto fellonia, né verranno con le armi contro allo stato giannai: pregheremo bene Dio e voi, che ne la conceda.” These notions of liberty are probably rearticulations of the piagnoni’s oft repeated “santa libertà” (holy liberty), discussed in detail in Polizzotto’s first chapter “Holy Liberty: The Establishment of a Political Tradition, 1494-1498” (8-53).
ology perceived very much indeed. There was Coluccio Salutati, rhetori-
cian and orator, and the poet Dino Frescobaldi, whose poems are still
considered today and praised for their clarity and copiousness. There was
Messer Francesco da Barberi, Luca da Panzano, and other writers,
Matteo Palmieri, Gianozzo Manetti, il Marsupino and Landino. In the
end this country produced that air of sciences, that vessel of such vigilant
sacredness and prudent priest Archbishop Saint Antoninus. But it is not
our specific task to speak at this moment of these aforementioned peo-
ple. It is enough for us to have shown how Florence generated a sequence
of such lively geniuses.

There is a brief parenthesis for mention of “foreigners”—that is, non-
Florentine Italians—worthy of praise. Among these, Antonio singles out
Leonardo Bruni d’Arezzo and Poggio Bracciolini. His catalogue of exem-
plary figures then culminates in: “Donato Acciaiuolo, the gran Platonico
Ficino, messer Marcello Virgilio, Bartolomeo Scala, i Medici, Angelo
Politiano, Conte della Mirandola, questi lo splendore di ogni altro offusca-
va sicuramente, e per ultimo, non so s’io mi debba dire per sua o nostra
grazia o disgrazia, il Girolamo Padre Savonarola”12 [29r-v, “Donato
Accaiuolo, the great Platonist Ficino, Messer Marcello Virgilio, Bartolomeo
Scala, the Medici, Angelo Politiano, and the Count of Mirandola, whose
splendour certainly obscured all others. Finally, I do not know if I should
say by his or our grace or misfortune, Father Girolamo Savonarola].

In other words, this list departs from the Three Crowns and a couple
of their forerunners to name those writers—mostly Florentines or, like
Pico, writers who were closely associated with Florence—who in Antonio’s
opinion most deserved lasting fame. There are also in this list some notable
exclusions, such as Luigi Pulci or (in a list of Florentine authors, not all of
whom are specifically poets) Niccolò Machiavelli, to mention only two
examples. In other words, what Antonio Benivieni has done is to pass lit-
ery judgments through praise or exclusion, and to spell out for us a kind
of rudimentary literary canon.13

12 This passage is particularly difficult to read and contains various autograph can-
cellations. For example, Antonio had written “avventura,” crossed it out, and
wrote “grazia” above it in the phrase “per sua o nostra grazia o disgrazia.” He also
abbreviated “Girolamo” by writing “G.” It is unclear if he kept “G. Padre
Savonarola” (which would be unusual syntax) or if he crossed out “G.,” intend-
ing simply “il Padre Savonarola.”

13 Of course, Antonio Benivieni does not use the term “canon,” but it is perhaps
not coincidental that this term comes into use in contexts beyond scriptural and
legalistic ones around the time when Antonio’s work begins to circulate.
So, what kind of writers does Antonio Benivieni praise in the *Vita*? Most notably, he does not separate in his estimation personal ethos from authorial prowess. Antonio appears to emphasize a certain brand of religious or ethical commitment, specifically one that highly favors *piagnone* sensibilities. Not surprisingly, Savonarola receives a special place in his catalogue. Saint Antoninus is also a choice unique to *piagnoni* for inclusion in a canon of great Florentine authors. The archbishop of Florence is best known for his Latin works, the *Summa Theologiae* and the *Chronicon*, but he also penned works in the vernacular, including a *Libretto della dottrina cristiana per i putti piccoli e giovanetti*, an *Opera a ben vivere*, and a *Regola di vita cristiana*. One of his great credits in Florentine civic life, moreover, is the installation of the reformed Dominicans in the convent of San Marco, which would become the heart of *piagnone* circles. The writings of the Medici, particularly Lorenzo the Magnificent, but also those of Lorenzo’s mother Lucrezia Tornabuoni, belong to literary canons of various ideological stripes; in this context, however, it is difficult to forget that Medici patronage largely financed San Marco. Fra Luigi Marsili’s perceptivity in theology earns special mention, alongside many writers who underscored an ethical imperative in their literary works (Salutati, Palmieri, Manetti), those who were informed by the desire for ethically minded juridical reforms (Barberino), as well as authors whose religious piety comes to define their literary production (Uberti and Poliziano). Pico, whose splendour outshines all others, according to Antonio, was among the self-proclaimed disciples of Savonarola and was even buried in the Dominican habit.

Dante also serves as a particularly strong model for these writers (Uberti, Barberino, Palmieri) or for his commentators (Manetti and Landino). In fact, according to Antonio, Dante is a touchstone for understanding Girolamo Benivieni as well as for understanding the differing civic attitudes in the *questione della lingua* represented in the *Vita*. Girolamo was a preeminent defender of Dante during a period when Petrarchism was particularly strong, as evidenced by his divulgation of Antonio Manetti’s commentary on Dante’s *Inferno*, his 1506 edition of the *Commedia*, and the proemial “Cantico in laude di Dante” he composed and published along with this edition.

Antonio’s catalogue is reminiscent of other Florentine literary

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14 On the life of St. Antoninus, see R. Morçay.
15 For more information on the “Cantico,” see my study “Dante as *Piagnone* Prophet: Girolamo Benivieni’s ‘Cantico in laude di Dante’ (1506).”
“canons,” perhaps most notably Cristoforo Landino’s in his Proemio to the 1481 edition of Dante’s Commedia. In it, Landino’s lofty rhetoric promoted Florence’s greatest assets and her most illustrious citizens, including the models of doctrine, eloquence, art, architecture, and music. The proem has received keen critical interpretation already by Ames-Lewis, Lentzen, and Rachel Jacoff, especially in light of its ideological agenda. According to Lentzen, in exposing the recondite Platonic meaning of Dante’s poem, Landino effectively makes Dante a hero for the ideals of Medicean Florence (41-42).

It makes little sense to talk about piagnone ideals before the rise of Girolamo Savonarola’s popularity in the early 1490s. However, when piagnone intellectuals begin to assert, for instance, new models for literary emulation, they are arguing against ideological positions that were established before the 1490s, such as Landino’s 1481 catalogue of Florence’s greatest vernacular writers. Temporal contextualization gets even trickier. In 1481, for instance, our piagnone representative, Girolamo Benivieni, was himself part of Landino’s intellectual circle consisting of Medicean intellectuals and artists of the Accademia. In fact, ideological alliances involve ever-changing shifts and compromises, sometimes strikingly so, in relatively brief periods of time. Here one could cite many examples. Some republicans side with the Medici when other families or factions appear overly strong, but then repay the Medici at their height with the same coin. Alamanno Rinuccini enjoyed some Medici favours, but produced violently anti-Medicean writings against “laurenziana...tirannide,” particularly in the 1479 dialogue On Liberty, which praised the Pazzi conspiracy (Martelli, 180). Rinuccini’s republican stance echoes to some

16 Indeed, these ideological tensions are not limited to the times of just Girolamo and Antonio Benivieni, either. According to Claudio Varese, “Dal tumulto dei Ciompi al rogo di Savonarola, Firenze visse una continua crisi... Da Giovanni Cavalcanti, che, medico, diventa poi antimedico, e lamento gli intrighi e la crudeltà di Cosimo, a Vespasiano da Bisticci cliente della casa dominante, alla quale non risparmia elogi, ma pronto a ricordare che le repubbliche muoiono quando non vi fioriscono uomini eccellenti e singolari, e quando vanno in esilio cittadini come Palla Strozzi, non certo inferiore per gusto, potenza mercenatizia, sapienza e prudenza civile a Cosimo de’ Medici; dalla prudenza di Giovanni Morelli, che consiglia ai suoi discendenti di non occuparsi dello Stato, di accettare sempre il parere del Palagio, e tutte le signorie, meno quella del popolo minuto, allo stesso Leon Battista Alberti, che vagheggiava nel De iciarbia il buon tiranno, e nel terzo libro Della famiglia diffida, con borgheze buon senso, di chi si occupa di politica —nella storiografia e nei memorialisti fiorentini, in forma diretta o indiretta, la coscienza di quella crisi continua” (x-xi).
extent Giovanni Cavalcanti's earlier position, represented by the highly critical remarks of Cosimo de' Medici's opponents Niccolò da Uzzano and Rinaldo degli Albizzi in his *Istorie fiorentine*, then he fiercely attacks Cosimo and his supporters in his Second Chronicle. There is also some indication that in 1494, after Piero de' Medici was driven from Florence, Francesco Filarete, a participant in the Medicean Platonic Academy, composed a "Della rinnovazione della libertà." Other writers, like Girolamo Benivieni, moved from Medici support to piagnone devotion. Ugolino Verino, for instance, dedicated his *Paradisus* to Lorenzo de' Medici, having enjoyed Medicean favour for many years, then, in 1491, embracing the piagnone ethos late in life, dedicated his *Carmen* to Savonarola. Still others, like Luca Landucci, shifted their loyalties from piagnone sympathy to the Medici after the profound delusions of Savonarola's perceived failures; after 1512 Landucci's diary indicates particularly strong support and praise for the Medici.

In the study of canon formation and the *questione della lingua*, we are accustomed to think about "political," "ideological," or "patriotic" positions in terms of the dialectic of Florentines versus "foreigners," that is, non-Florentine Italians. Landino's 1481 edition of the *Commedia* was the Florentine response to Milanese and Venetian commentaries on Dante. Benivieni's 1506 edition of the *Commedia* was the Florentine response to Pietro Bembo's scholarship. Later, much closer to Antonio Benivieni's time, Paolo Cortesi's work or Marcantonio Sabellico's work was seen as the foreign attack that was to prompt Benedetto Varchi's Florentine response, and so forth. It is true that when faced with foreign attack on literary matters, Florentines tended to rally together behind the names of their greatest authorial models, especially the Three Crowns. In fact, writers from as different ideological stripes as the Medicean Giannozzo Manetti in the 1440s, the Mirandolan-Florentine piagnone Giovanni Francesco Pico in 1512, and the republican Niccolò Machiavelli circa 1515, all claimed Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch as the glory of the Florentine language and literature.17

The problem with the Florentine versus foreigner dialectic is, however, that it does not take into consideration notable differences among the Florentines in the selection of other literary models. In his essay "Histories of Literature in the Quattrocento" M.L. McLaughlin argues that "there

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17 Incidentally, Florence's ability to claim the Three Crowns is a fine example of the strength of Florentine propaganda. Of the three, only Dante was born in Florence; and none of the three died or was buried there. Furthermore, all three enjoyed their most felicitous periods of literary composition outside Florence's city walls.
were what amounted to two factions of humanists in Florence around 1460" (73-74). At the head of one faction, was Iohannes Argyropoulos (1410-90), who “encouraged a more sympathetic approach to scholastic philosophy”; at the head of the other, hostile to scholastic Latin that was “devoid of rhetorical ornament,” was Landino. As McLaughlin traces his argument, however, it becomes increasingly clear that the ideological division falls largely along political lines, with republicans like Rinuccini supporting Argyropoulos, and Lorenzo and Alberti sustaining the Medicean Landino. After the 1490s, this dualistic understanding of cultural tensions is further complicated by the *piagnone* perspective.

In Antonio's *Vita*, a number of authors are mentioned who also appear in ideologically competing catalogues. Some are unique to the *piagnoni*, most notably Fra Luigi Marsili, Fra Girolamo Savonarola, and St. Antoninus. Mediceans, including Landino and Poliziano, and secular republicans, such as Machiavelli and Gelli, do not make any mention of these three figures’ authorial contributions. Moreover, when Medicean or republican writers cite authors from Antonio's catalogue, they are typically not as interested in the authors’ “good discipleship” and “perception in theology,” or whether the writers contributed to a “period of vigilant sanctity.” These are the kinds of phrases that *piagnoni* associate with their authorial models, thus basing their assessments of literary merit on the individuals’ moral character as well as on the outcome—in terms of spiritual *renovatio* in the community—of the writers’ contributions.

For the Medicean perspective, Lorenzo the Magnificent himself offers extended considerations of literary vernacular models in his *Commentary on My Sonnets*, but also in the *Raccolta Aragonese*, an anthology of vernacular poetry that he commissions as a gift for Frederick of Aragon (1452-1504), son of the king of Naples. This last work, completed by 1477 and prefaced by Poliziano, presents a kind of canon of vernacular writers up to that time that is still largely accepted today. Selected for inclusion in the anthology are poets of the *scuola siciliana* such as Jacopo da Lentini and Pier delle Vigne, as well as intermediary poets such as Bonagiunta da Lucca, the *stilnovisti* Guittone d’Arezzo, Guido Guinizelli, Guido Cavalcanti, Dante, and Cino da Pistoia, and, of course, Petrarch. Most importantly, however, the anthology is constructed in such a way that it culminates in examples of Lorenzo’s own poetry. Poliziano’s comparison in the prefatory letter between the literature of ancient Greece and contemporary Florence argued for the illustriousness of the vernacular language at the same time that it implied a rebirth in the Golden Age of literature in Florence.
Other Medicean authors, such as Landino, reconfirmed key figures from this catalogue and added other recent names: Leonardo Bruni, Poggio Bracciolini, Leon Battista Alberti, and Matteo Palmieri, among others. Another Medicean, Naldo Naldi, chose to emphasize those writers closest to him (Lorenzo de' Medici and Marsilio Ficino) for his encomia. Mediceans, therefore, viewed earlier “foreign” vernacular contributions as Florence’s rightful literary inheritance and as a preparation for their own accomplishments. Mediceans claimed for their city particular favour from the Muses and linked, as closely as possible, civic political power with literary and cultural brilliance.

When we move to consider the republican perspective, at times it can seem as if the distinctions are not terribly pronounced. However, the republican focus tends to fall much more on the question of language, than on valuations of writers based on their moral or philosophic substance. Machiavelli, in his Dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua, praises three Florentine authors as part of his linguistic considerations. But he plays it safe by limiting his praise only to Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch. In his Ragionamento sopra le difficoltà di mettere in regole la nostra lingua (1551), Giovan Battista Gelli relates a conversation with Cosimo Bartoli in which Bartoli requests that Gelli write a work that offers the rules for beautiful Florentine speech and writing. The models for this language of “parole scelte e facili…naturale dolcezza… e un certo che di grandezza e di nobiltà” (465, “choice and fluent words, natural sweetness, and something of greatness and nobility”) were many of the most prominent republicans, including Piero Soderini, who was Gonfaloniere during the times that Gelli wistfully remembers. Among the “other literati who used to gather at that time in the garden of the Rucellai” he lists “Bernardo Rucellai, Francesco da Diacceto, Giovanni Canacci, Giovanni Corsi, Piero Martelli, Francesco Vettori …Piero Soderini…Marcello Virgilio…Ruberto Acciaiuoli e Luigi Guicciardini” (465). Gelli’s catalogue is a veritable roll call of the Who’s Who of republican intellectual models at this time. The frequency with which Gelli repeats the phrase “Dotti” o “Literati de’ Rucellai” seems also almost to want to lend to the group the status of an Accademia Medicea.

Civic Attitudes in the Questione della lingua.

The canonization of vernacular literary models depends on a particular valorization of the Florentine language. According to Antonio, Girolamo purposefully chose to write in the Florentine vernacular because he was one of the few Florentines to recognize in the language the “Treasure” his city pos-
sessed ("Tesoro che haveva in seno"; 2v). Antonio upbraids the Florentines of Girolamo’s time for more readily chasing after the ruins of Rome than refining her own language, given what he calls “the strong imaginings of that time that attention be paid only to Latin Authors” ("essendo forte immaginazione a quel tempo, che solamente dei Latini Autori si dovesse curare"; 2v-3r). Antonio proceeds to bewail the critical judgment of the time when he states:

da più reputavano coloro meno intelligibili, più rozzi erano e più orridi, credendo che, quanto manco si lasciavano intendere li Autori, tanto più Latini fossero, et non hubbero essi per certo intorno ai Volgari dicitori, se alcuni pure ne degnarsi, molto migliore giudizio, coloro da più reputando, quali più della durezza e peregrinità fossero stati vaghi. (2v-3r)

[they thought more of those (authors) who were less intelligible, more uncouth and horrendous, thinking that the less one could understand of those Authors, the more ‘Latin’ they were. Moreover, they certainly did not have the (same esteem) for writers in the Vernacular, though some were more worthy of better judgment. Instead they held those (Authors) in higher esteem who were more prone to incomprehensibility and foreignness.]

So great was the temptation to write in Latin that, cried Antonio, “Dante stesso, il quale era pur nato per fare conto e pretioso al Mondo il nostro pulito Idioma fu talmente invitato e si trovava si fattamente trapresso da questa reputazione della Romana lingua che vicino ne fu a comporre il suo nobile Poema Latinamente. Miseri noi, se in ciò Dante durava” (4r, “Dante himself, who was born to make our pristine language known and appreciated to the World, was so drawn and so taken by the reputation of the Latin language that he was close to composing his Poem in Latin. Wretched us if Dante had persisted in that!).

According to Antonio, Girolamo held the Florentine vernacular in such high esteem, however, because he believed that “in tutte le cose la Natura vince[re] l’artifitio” (4v, “in all things Nature surpasses artifice”). This is to say, that writers succeed when they follow what Mother Nature teaches and informs intrinsically through the various generations of writers, and not by imitating others. Florentines cannot write more perfectly in Latin than they can in their native Florentine, nor can foreigners (that is, non-Florentine Italians) mimic Florentine more perfectly than the Florentines themselves. By the same token, Girolamo believed that those Florentine writers who insisted on writing in Latin were more “rude” because they were not composing in the language that came naturally to
them. Antonio portrays Girolamo as bucking a trend when he wrote in Florentine, rather than in the Latin language then in vogue.

On the subject of the question, non-Florentine Italians receive from Antonio both praise and blame. On the one hand, when the Florentine language came to be understood by foreigners they began to model their compositions with greater judgment and more subtlety on Florentine writings. Some of the foreigners, Antonio stated, actually "risuscitandoci gli ammaestramenti di parlare e di scrivere regolatamente" (5v, "resuscitated for us the rules of writing [the Florentine vernacular] and speaking it properly"). He continues:

Dunque ci furono da Vinegia, non molto dopo, e da Padova mandate le regole con le quali i Fiorentini antichi havevano parlato e scritto, e noi il dovevamo, volendo e l'uno e l'altro debitamente fare, se l'ordine dei tempi a Girolamo conceduto hasse il potersi meglio valere di queste osservazioni, o se lo havere a combattere, con la ruvidenza della sua età, con la bassezza delle strambotti, con la ostinatione dei rigorosi grammatici, luogo e tempo lasciatiol hasse di potere meglio a quelle pensare, più chiaro egli, più cari e più pregianti ne sareino gli scritti suoi di dotti gravi e pietosi concetti. (6r)

[not long thereafter, the rules with which ancient Florentines spoke and wrote—and in which we ought to speak and write, if we want to do either properly—were sent to us from Venice and then from Padua. If the quality of the times given to Girolamo had allowed him to appreciate better these observations, or if he had not had to struggle with the rudeness of his times, with the baseness of the strambotti, with the obstinacy of rigorous grammarians, if he had been given the time and space to think more profoundly about these rules, he would have been clearer and his writings would have been rendered more worthy and more distinguished by wise and pious concepts.]

On the other hand, in the linguistic assessments of Dante by Ricordano, Villani, and others who object to some of the poet's words on the basis of how they sound to the ear, Antonio sees an example of a wrong-headed attitude that privileges the sweetness of the sound over the substance of the meaning: "'epa, mora e Croia, Satura, rimproccio, redotto, battifolle'...et somiglianti, deh! perché questa schifiltà ci piglia solo per Dante, se allora così rigido non era il giudizio, divenuto poi superbissimo, delle orecchie?" (Greco, 515; "'epa, mora and Croia, Satura, rimproccio, redotto, battifolle'... and other words like that, alas! why is Dante alone

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18The strambotto is a popular verse form, not one considered noble or elevated.
being blamed for them when at that time the judgement of the ear had not become so mighty”).

In sum, Antonio contributes to the understanding of the difference in Florentine and Venetian evaluations of poetic merit. For Florentine inten-ditori like Girolamo Benivieni, that merit rests on the ethical or moral virtue of the poet, while for foreigners like Pietro Bembo it rests on the lyrical beauty, the sweetness of sound, the purity of expression, and the harmony of poetic concepts. The two positions are not entirely mutually exclusive, but Girolamo’s view certainly favours ethics over aesthetics, while Bembo’s, for instance, privileges aesthetics over ethics. Florentines thus interpret Dante’s intention for writing the Commedia as a calling on the reader to “mutare la vita cattiva in buona” (Greco, 513; “change one’s wicked life to follow the good path”), the same impetus that Antonio claims for presenting Girolamo’s life in the first place.

Ultimately, the literary and linguistic views that Antonio attributes to Girolamo Benivieni in the Vita differ substantially from those of more prominent Florentines with significantly different political agendas, such as Machiavelli or Gelli, or non-Florentines, such as Cortesi or Bembo. Consideration of this unique piagnone view, which, co-existed in sometimes politically tense or puzzling ways—as is evident in the description of the conversation at Cardinal Giulio de’ Medici’s dinner gathering—provides another crucial piece in the complex puzzle of nascent theories of literature in the Florentine vernacular and their ideological and political underpinnings.

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19 Greco also cites this passage (515).
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